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ABSTRACT

Learning to write in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) provides learners with a voice in their new culture and enhances language acquisition. There are two general approaches to teaching writing: free writing, which is not necessarily edited or revised, and process writing which is revised and edited and shared with a wider audience. In addition, the language experience approach is often used with beginning literacy learners to provide opportunities for reading and writing through personal experiences and oral language. Teachers and learners may also have specific kinds of writing they want to do or specific skills to be developed. Writing activities that are engaging and challenging, add variety to writing instruction, and develop important literacy skills may include: having learners write about what they want to learn, by writing a simple letter, dialogue journal entry, or response to a question; reacting to a text or stimulus; writing letters, such as letters of complaint, cover letters, or advice letters; analyzing and synthesizing information; and making lists, which helps generate vocabulary and provides the basis for larger pieces. Teachers should give learners opportunities to write about meaningful topics, participate in varied writing activities, and feel that their writing has value. Contains 12 references. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Improving ESL Learners' Writing Skills

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Writing is a continuing process of discovering how to find the most effective language for communicating one's thoughts and feelings. It can be challenging, whether writing in one's native language or in a second language. Yet, as adult English as a second language (ESL) learners put their thoughts on paper, see their ideas in print, and share them with others, they find they develop a powerful voice in their new culture (Peyton, 1993; Tran, 1997). Writing also enhances language acquisition as learners experiment with words, sentences, and larger chunks of writing to communicate their ideas effectively and to reinforce the grammar and vocabulary they are learning in class (Bello, 1997).

This digest suggests general approaches to writing and specific activities that can make writing easier and more enjoyable for both learners and teachers. These suggestions are by no means exhaustive, but they are presented to encourage new thinking about how writing can be incorporated into adult ESL instruction. (See Auerbach, 1992; Cheatham,Clark, McKay, Schnieder, & Siedow, 1994; Crandall & Peyton, 1993; and Rabideau, 1993, for additional suggestions.)

Approaches

There are two general approaches to writing: free writing, which is not necessarily edited or worked on further, and a more extended process approach. In addition, the language experience approach (LEA) is often used with beginning literacy learners to provide opportunities for reading and writing through personal experiences and oral language (Taylor, 1992).

Free Writing: Learners write for a period of time in class on a topic of interest to them. This writing can take many forms, including quick writes, which are time-limited, done individually, and not always shared; and dialogue journals, written to a teacher, a classmate or other partner who then responds (Peyton & Staton, 1996). These writings may be kept in a portfolio or notebook. From these pieces, themes may emerge that can act as springboards for more extensive writing that is discussed, revised, edited, and published.

Process Writing: Process writing usually begins with some form of *pre-writing activity* in which learners work together in groups to generate ideas about a particular topic. This could include sharing the free-writing piece described above, brainstorming, making a list or timeline, or simply reflecting on an experience. Each group member then works alone to compose a *first draft*, concentrating on getting ideas down on paper, without worrying about spelling or grammar. They then read their drafts to each other in pairs or small groups. They encourage each other with constructive comments and questions as they seek better understanding of what each other is trying to write. They might discuss the purpose of the writing, what the author learned or hopes others will learn, and what the reader likes best or has trouble with (Crandall & Peyton,1993, p.65). *Revising* begins based on these comments and responses. Now the main concern is clarity as the writer looks at organization and sequencing of ideas, the need for additional information or examples, areas of confusion, and words or phrases that could make the writing clearer (Cheatham et al, 1994). Revisions should be shared until the ideas seem clear. Then, *editing* can begin as the focus moves to spelling, grammar, punctuation, transition words (first, next), and signal words (for example, another reason is . . .). Learners should be encouraged to edit what they know or have studied. A checklist can help them focus on specific points. They should use each other and the teacher as resources, in addition to the dictionary and grammar books. When the learner and the teacher feel satisfied with a particular piece of writing, it should be *shared with a wider audience*—the whole class, family and friends, or the community. Pieces can be displayed around the room or compiled and published as a book, magazine, newsletter, or newspaper. Learners should be encouraged to read each other's work and comment on final products.

Depending on the amount of class time available for writing, the demands of the curriculum, the needs of the learners, and the comfort level of the learners and the teacher, variations in the process might occur. For example, pre-writing activities such as brainstorming can be done orally or in writing, individually or as a whole class. Learners might prepare their first draft in class or as homework, depending on how much time they have outside class to write. Rather than having learners work in groups to respond to drafts, the teacher might hold conferences with individual learners to discuss their writing and ask questions to clarify ideas. As issues arise (e.g., trouble with topic sentences, the use of quotation marks), the teacher might spend class time working on specific points with the entire class. See Cheatham et al. (1994) for a more detailed discussion of a process writing approach with adult learners.

Language Experience Approach: Although there are many variations in the application of LEA, the basic process remains constant: learners relate individual or group experiences to a teacher, aide, or fellow learner, who transcribes these contributions for use in reading and writing activities. In a class situation, the experience may stem from something that the learners did together or have in common. Before any writing occurs, the experience is discussed. Then the class works together to develop a written text. Often the exact words of the learners are recorded as dictated, without transcriber corrections to grammar or vocabulary so that the focus is on the content. The text is then read aloud and opportunities are provided for learners to practice reading it. Extension activities that encourage further writing can be developed to accommodate

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learners at different proficiency levels. For example, beginning learners may simply copy the story or make their own illustrated dictionary of vocabulary words. More advanced learners may produce their own individual written pieces on the same experience. See Taylor, 1992 for a more comprehensive explanation of LEA.

Activities

Teachers and learners may also have specific kinds of writing they want to do or specific skills that need to be developed. The following writing activities can be engaging and challenging and can add variety to writing instruction. They also develop important literacy skills. The writing that emerges from an activity may be an end in itself or may lead to more extensive writing, employing one of the approaches discussed above.

Assessing Needs: Having learners write about what they want to learn and why is an excellent way for the teacher to conduct a class needs assessment. Beginning level learners can write just a few words in English, or in their native language if need be. At higher levels, learners can write a simple letter, an entry in a dialog journal, or even an essay. They can be asked to respond to questions such as "Where do you use English?"; "Where do you want to use English?"; "What language skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening, use of vocabulary, use of grammar) are you interested in developing?"; and "Where and how do you practice reading?" (e.g., at home, reading books to my child) (Weddel & Van Duzer, 1997).

Reacting to a Text or Stimulus: Learners can record their reactions to various stimuli. They might do a free writing or an LEA piece in response to a piece of music; a photograph or drawing; a sound, such as water being poured; or even smells, such as the aroma of different spices or flowers. They can also respond to a field trip, movies or written texts such as stories, poetry, and narratives. Reactions can be in single words, sentences, paragraphs, an essay, or a poem (Kazemak & Rigg, 1995.)

Writing Letters: Letters of complaint (while studying consumerism), cover letters (while preparing for employment), or letters of advice (while studying newspaper features) allow learners to practice some of the types of writing that are useful in their daily lives. At beginning levels, learners can fill in the blanks with content words such as, "The _____ is broken." At more advanced levels, learners can compose letters on their own or be guided by questions.

Analyzing and Synthesizing Information: Adults frequently need to interpret information that appears in graphic form such as charts, drawings, and maps, or interpret and synthesize information from several sources. To prepare for this kind of writing, learners can complete grids based on information they gather from class or community surveys. For example, at the beginning level, a simple grid can ask for the names of the learners in the class and their native countries or languages. Groups of learners can work together to fill in parts of the grid and then share their information with the entire class to complete the grid. They can then use this information to write simple sentences describing their class, such as "There are nine Spanish speakers and four Russian speakers in our class." At higher levels, learners can gather more extensive data and then write a descriptive paragraph or composition. Using maps, learners can write directions for getting from one location to another. After reading articles on a topic such as immigration, learners can write a letter to the editor or a summary of the information presented.

Making Lists: Lists can help learners generate vocabulary and provide the basis for larger pieces. For example, when studying banking, learners might enjoy listing how they would spend a million dollars. Other lists might be about favorite foods, places, or activities; wishes; things missed about one's country; or things liked in the United States. For a beginning learner, a few words might suffice. More proficient learners may write several sentences or more.

Conclusion

Nobel Prize-winning author Nadine Gordimer (1982) has said that all great writing is deeply personal and heartfelt. Teachers need to provide learners with opportunities to write about topics that are relevant to their lives, to participate in various writing activities, and to feel that their writing has value. By integrating writing with content at every level of instruction, teachers help learners find their own voices in their new language and develop the ability to communicate effectively in different contexts and with different audiences.

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